

“I dreamed that I was in Hell”

by Paul Kim

March 26th, 2018.

There are waking dreams and sleeping dreams. I do not know what it was that I had, but it was a dream nonetheless. Or perhaps one of those visions like the religious prophets experience while fasting in the middle of the desert. I don't know. But such visions are rare and I am in no way thinking of myself as being a prophet.

But whatever this vision was was so gruesome to me that I resolve to write it down here, so that I don't forget. Forgetting is to open the possibility of being frightened again, and perhaps I wish to dull my fright until the thought of the dream is no longer a cause of concern. Maybe remembering is to frighten myself again and again. Perhaps the dulling of fright is inevitable. But enough.

It came to me one night as I was sitting on an armchair on a cool Sunday midnight, staring at the silvery full moon. I had there a pipe in my mouth and the rich, thick smoke was dancing about the room, coiling, twisting, turning, unraveling. It was one of those nights where deep thinking and daydreaming comes by easily, and any idea was so vivid that you were almost physically exploring it.

Now, every so often one wonders what one looks like as they are at their immediate moment, like as if to wonder what God sees when he sees us. Would God see me here, from that corner over there, sitting on my armchair with a pondrous look, like one of those sages in typical Renaissance paintings? Or would God see me from that corner, but now with a dull, unfocused look? Or maybe both? Maybe God sees me along with everyone else in the world, like to perceive this whole building and all its myriad lives in one divine moment—like one of those cutaway models of buildings that showed not only the architectural details of the buildings but also the interior design down to the non-essentials, and with it, the tiny little figurines of people, usually families, as if to have the viewer to imagine a possible life being lived inside of it. And I became one of those figurines, there, sitting in my armchair *on the twenty-fifth floor of my apartment looking out at a two-watt full moon shining from table-lamp orbit—and below me were the figurine pretend lives of everyone, passing by the lonely old pensioners living with their dogs, the newly wed couples with their first child, the single 25-year old eating take-out, the single 50-year-old watching television—all the way down to the ground with its painted matchstick lampposts and felt roads, and even further still, going far, far below the sewers and tunnels of ugly human maintenance, and then under the mangled and compressed bodies of the some--illions of people who ever lived packed into one neat little crust and further and further down until there was blackness, and then darkness, a darkness so deep and rich that it was impossible to tell if there was any motion, until out of the darkness there came from below or above the faintest light that shone its rays towards nowhere in particular. And following the light like as if to cling onto rope in deep water, there was, as if seen from above, a suburban city of three hundred-thousand blocks greeting the first glimmers of dawn from the horizon where the city abruptly stopped, and there was only empty desert, and turning back to the city, there was all the smallest outlines of bare buildings and bare apartments and more and more and more and more of the same on every empty block...*

Until at that moment I found myself, disoriented, dizzy, and stumbling about like as if I had forgotten how to walk. Here I was, between rows upon rows of empty houses and shops lining the sides of the wide cobblestone road that burned hot like coals on my feet. The houses were ashen and crumbled, with only hints of faded colours on their brick walls, and signposts dusted over so much that only the faintest outlines of what they said protruded from the surface. The windows of the buildings were terribly charred, as if a wrathful Passover fire had swept through each house.

I clenched my feet over the hot cobblestone path, as if I would fall upwards otherwise. Slowly, the city stopped its ebb and flow, and when the urban sea was calm, I chanced to look up. There was no sun. The light shined through bright red and orange patches like magma within the black rock sky. What patches of grass and shrub that I could see among the empty street seemed to be burning and smoking.

Then, from across the right end of the street came the *thump-thump-thump* of a bass drum, closer and closer, like the thundering steps of a military march. War drums, I thought. The young ones must be going to war... no, the rhythm is too slow. The war's already happened. They are returning to the war with the casualties already counted and among the dead. A funeral procession. But why the intensity? No... there is something jovial, not triumphant about this march. Can an army have a sense of humour? But then I heard the *tam-tam* of the cymbals swinging eighths, with the walking of the tuba echoing the footsteps of the procession marching in time to the war drums, whose beating had become so loud that it seemed to make my bones tremble with it. I drew closer to the street and saw the procession appear from the right—a marching jazz band of clerics dressed in black cassocks and bowler hats, their instruments of all shapes gleaming against the fiery sky. And within the swing rhythms and the dissonant brass, I heard the quiet mournful wails of a soul singer who screamed and choked out the blues to the thump-thump-thump rhythm and out of tune, ministered by the saxophones that hummed out tritones like a weeping chorus of mourning angels.

Following behind the procession was a dwarfish old man, dressed in a dusty pinstriped suit and a walking stick. He was limping along with the rhythm, humming the melody of the soul singer with a shrill, ghoulish voice. When he had reached the middle of the street, he began to fall behind the rhythm, then behind the procession as it marched away from him, leaving him panting and leaning on his stick. By the time that I had walked over to him, the band's music had faded into the rumble of the war drum again.

I came beside him and helped him get steady.

“Old man, who's the procession for?”

“Nobody in particular.”

He spoke with a raspy, ghoulish voice. His wrinkled face was lined from forehead to ear with sweat, and I couldn't tell if it was from the heat or from the effort he made to stay standing. He began to hobble again down the street in the opposite direction. He had gone a stone's throw away before I thought to catch up with him.

“Then why the funeral procession? Where's it heading?”

“I dunno.”

“Then why do you follow it?”

“To find out where it's goin' off to. But now my heart's gone and failed me and the marchers've left me behind. Now I've got nothing else to do but head the way I was going before.”

“And where are you heading now, old man?”

“I'm heading for service at the church.”

“Do you mind if I accompany you? I don't have anything else to do.”

“Neither do I. You run out of things to do when you're down here.”

“Down here? Underground?”

“Tartarus. The Afterlife. Heaven. Hell. Purgatory. Call it whatever you like.”

He continued to walk down the path, and I followed him. It took me some courage to ask a question that crept up in the back of my mind like a bug in a wine glass.

“Old man. Don’t you think it’s too late for salvation?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You say we’re in hell.”

“That we are.

“So we’re already damned.”

“Indeed we are! Been damned and forgotten since the day you and I were born! And there ain’t any gettin’ out, no sir. Hang yourself on the tree yonder like so many of those other lost spirits and all you do is turn into one of them corpses. Damned, *and* dead too!”

He gestured at a gigantic yew tree over in the distance—how did I not notice? Hundreds of freshly hanging bodies were dangling side by side, held up by nooses of belts, scarves. Some of the better-dressed ones were hanging by rope. Almost as soon as I had seen it we had passed it by, and a nameless building moved over and blocked the view of the yew tree.

“Then why worship? Isn’t it too late to ask for grace in this graceless world?”

But the old man shook his head at me. “It ain’t about grace or forgiveness or salvation or what ideas ye’ve got about God, boy!”

“Then what is it about?”

But the old man waved the question away, and went on walking until suddenly he turned towards one of the many empty buildings, and beckoned me closer. Nothing about it seemed to look as if it was a place of worship, no signs or any kind of thing to distinguish it from the rest of the apartments. He disappeared into the dark, narrow passageway, and, having to push my back against the side walls to fit through, I sidestepped my way inside the stuffy, oven-like corridor and went through the darkness, following the vague outline of the old man until he stopped just as arbitrarily at a certain spot, and opened a door that seemed to come out of nowhere.

He went on in, and I followed him in to find a large, somewhat brighter room with pews populated by other folk dressed in pinstriped suits, and a pulpit at the front. I heard the shuffling of feet as a man encased completely in black rubber shuffled up to the pulpit. He was accompanied by two other fellows in those black cassocks and bowler hats. The strange suit he wore encased his entire body completely, binding both his arms and much of his legs, and covering everything, including his eyes and nose, with only a zipper at where the mouth was. The congregation applauded as one of the men unzipped the mouth for him. It occurred to me then that this was the preacher—this slavelike gimp was the holiest man in the room, as he began the sermon with a voice like a weeping baritone, mumbling a strange babble that sounded like the background chatter from afar. I took a seat in the back alongside the old man.

I looked around the room. Stained glass windows lined the walls, showing scenes from the scriptures. Job was there on one window, afflicted with all sorts of diseases and yet standing triumphantly over the corpses of his family and various angels, beaming as he cursed God with all his might. Jonah was there in another, having made a home in the whale’s belly. Abraham in the next, standing over his dead child’s body as he burned him on the altar. But one stained-glass depiction had Christ on the cross, but unlike the beaming faces of the rest, his face was turned downwards. It was not even grimaced from the pain, but iron-cast and unchanging as it looked at the mocking crowds below. Was it resignation? But yet there was no anger or malice in that gaze. Has he ran out?

Then suddenly the preacher's voice became booming and passionate, singing out verses as the congregation replied in turn:

"...and you can't swear by nothing!"

"Nothin' at all!"

"Not by heaven..."

"Not by the Lord's throne..."

"...not by the Earth..."

"Not by anythin'!"

"Not by nothing!"

"Hallelujah!"

"Hallelujah."

I looked around to notice that much of the congregation had whip marks on their bodies, on their faces. At the distance there were Egyptian sarcophagi with nails lining the inside, pillories, cuffs chained to the stone walls, among other gadgets with straps, chains, spikes, all sorts of strange things...

"So let your yes be yes..."

"...and your no be no..."

"Amen!"

"Amen!"

"So to life?"

"Amen!"

"And to death?"

"Amen!"

"...and to pain?"

"Amen!"

"...and to righteous judgement?"

"Amen!"

As the repetitive back and forth progressed, the two men grabbed two whips from back and began to strike the preacher harshly, and the muffled screams began to fill the church. Yet the preacher more and more passionately sung out his verses.

"...and to agony!"

"Amen!"

Snap!

"...and to justice?"

Snap!

"Amen!"

"Amen!"

Snap!

"Amen!"

Snap! Snap!

"AMEN!"

Snap!

"Amen!"

I couldn't tell if he was screaming in pleasure or pain. It must have been both. But the sight had

become nauseating to me, and I got up to move away as the preacher fell from his pulpit and the two men continued to strike him while he was writhing on the floor, and the whole congregation was only replying to the screaming and then nothing coming out of his mouth with a joyous “Amen!” As I quietly made my way to the door, I heard them sing,

*Wretched man, wretched man
Now your body is like your soul.*

The old man followed me out to the dark corridor and stopped me there.

“Where’re you going? You said you had nothing else to do.”

“Old man, this—this is no church service. It’s a public execution. I see nothing holy about this at all. There’s no good news or purpose or divinity being spoken of here, and I don’t wish to see it anymore. All this pain-inflicting does no good.”

“No good?”

“What good can come from this suffering?”

“Goodness comes from suffering, boy. And all church services are just the outpouring of pain to the whole community and self-punishment over our condemnation to be free. Where the preachers of the earth called on the flock to confess their sins and ask for repentance, it’s not different from how a man apologizes by shaming himself and sharing in the grief he’s caused another. Shared pain is how we know each other and shared pain is how we come to love each other. How’s that any different from when a fella sings the blues, or when a child weeps over a lost ma?”

“And what good does this communal pain do to alleviate it?”

“Like I said, it ain’t about salvation.”

“You haven’t told me what this is all about.”

“It’s about acceptance, boy, just as one accepts their lot in life and happily takes the great burden graciously. Just like how God made me so to be damned, the first to be damned—so that I would fulfill His mighty purpose and plan as the villain of His great story.”

“So you are the Devil?”

“If I wasn’t the Devil, I’d be anything else that the Lord needs me to be. But he chose me to be the Devil because I was obedient and loyal, so loyal that I would do without question what he commands me to do, even if it is to do evil. But nothing about what God commands is evil, for it is precisely because I exist that the good shone through on the earth. And now that that’s finished, I stay here with the devotion of his most loyal and beloved angel to worship him even from the pits of hell where I belong.”

“You confuse me. You worship a God that has betrayed you.”

“Foolish! How could I be betrayed when I’ve done as he commands, knowing exactly well the consequences are? I know indeed, that the Lord loves me? No one can love without some thing to hate in comparison, and when one realizes it, they come to love that which they hate, too.”

I was starting to feel queasy being around him, so I began to slip away. Strange, strange man! What kind of person sacrifices their entire being for another? Sensing that I was no longer interested in talking with him, he waved at me, and shouted from far across the dark corridor,

“Ain’t nothing but desert out there. You’re either damned here, dead there, or lost nowhere.”

And he disappeared into the darkness as I made my way out of the building. I paced away from the church, hoping that it would disappear into the mass of buildings until I could no longer find it, to the rhythm of the *thump-thump-thump* of the procession coming again. Back down the path I went, through the winding streets of Hell. Where do I go now? The thumping got louder and louder as the procession

was making its way back to the street I came from.

I briefly passed by the yew tree, with the hanging corpses on it. It had gotten smaller. One of the bodies groaned slightly, before it pulled a knife somewhere out of its pocket, and cut the noose over it. It fell to the ground, got to its feet, and quietly walked away from the tree, as if it could no longer could tolerate being a corpse any longer. A funny thought struck my mind there: The tree must be bearing fruit. Yes, one tires of being dead. Being dead must be an agonizingly boring experience, and something, just something must be what spurs them back into life. But where to, I wonder? Will the former corpse now go join the congregation, or the procession, or head to the desert, or find themselves torn between all the possibilities like myself and wander aimlessly?

The thumping became louder and louder as I headed further down the street. Was I getting closer to the desert or deeper into the city? I turned from one street towards another. The thumping was louder still—or was it my heart? I looked around. No one around. Where's the procession? I headed to the left. Still louder. Went back the way I came. Even louder. I continued to the right and heard the *tam-tam* of the cymbals and the swing beats, and the *feverish jazz music blare out from the saxophones as the procession came from the other corner and headed towards my way. I made a turn so as not to get in their way but they turned towards me still. I thought to head inside of a building and yet now the first floors were all bare of doorways, only walls that stretched from one corner of the street to the next until I was sliding my eyes across all the walls, looking for somewhere to hide as the procession headed towards me, blaring out a deafening contrapuntal melody of every pitch and every note and every rhythm until it was all collapsed into one great thump of the war drum that made all of hell vibrate in a cry of great agony, the procession finally at arm's length, finger's length, on me, inside me, was me, and a fiery hand gripping mine to dance...*

And I was awake again. Sitting in my armchair, staring into the night. The full moon had gone from sight. There were hot embers on my hand that had fallen from my pipe, and I shook it off of me.

In only two hours' worth of time did I have a vision that had frightened me so much, and it still bothered me even after waking up. It was not that I thought that this vision was even likely to be even close to reality, but it was that this vision was possible, or even plausibly something that resembled hell, and that I would go to Hell, and that I had experienced it so vividly disturbed me so much that I resolved not to sleep for the rest of the night. Hence the existence of this manuscript.

By 4 o'clock, I comforted myself by promising, if I did end up in this Hell, if Hell really was like what I had experienced, then I will not follow the procession but I will head to the desert. Better to the infinite beyond the finite forever of shame. Yes, better be lost and to lose myself than to resign myself into self-flagellation. I glanced again into the cool night sky and thought on this promise, to remember it when the skies turn orange like magma.